

Message Text

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ACTION OES-09

INFO OCT-01 AF-10 ADS-00 DOE-17 DOEE-00 ACDA-12
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PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 NSCE-00 SSO-00 ICAE-00 INRE-00
SPH-01 /088 W

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FM AMEMBASSY PRETORIA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6669

INFO AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN

AMCONSUL DURBAN

AMCONSUL JOHANNESBURG

C O N F I D E N T I A L PRETORIA 09786

E.O. 12065: GDS 10/26/85 (MOATS, SIMEON) OR-P

TAGS: MNUC, PARM, PEPR, SF

SUBJECT: (C) SOUTH AFRICA: SUSPECTED NUCLEAR EVENT

REF: STATE 278942

1. C - ENTIRE TEXT.

2. UNDER HEADLINES LIKE "S.A. IN ATOM BLAST ROW,"
"S.A. TESTED AN ATOM BOMB...YANKS," AND "ATOM BLAST
MYSTERY," THE SOUTH AFRICAN AFTERNOON PRESS (OCT 26) GAVE
PROMINENT COVERAGE TO U.S. MEDIA REPORTS OF A POSSIBLE
NUCLEAR BLAST IN THE VICINITY OF SOUTH AFRICA AND TO
SUBSEQUENT SOUTH AFRICAN DENIALS. SEVERAL PAPERS CARRIED
THE FULL TEXT OF THE STATE DEPARTMENT STATEMENT (REFTEL);
OTHERS SIMPLY MADE REFERENCE TO IT.

3. THE CONTENT AND TONE OF THE AFTERNOON PRESS COVERAGE
AVAILABLE IN PRETORIA COULD BE CHARACTERIZED BY THE LEAD
PARAGRAPH IN THE "HOOFSTAD" (AFRIKAANS DAILY): "AMERICA
HAS ACCUSED SOUTH AFRICA IN A PRESS RELEASE OF EXPLODING
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AN ATOMIC BOMB IN THE ATMOSPHERE OVER THE SEA, BUT NEVER
QUERIED THE GOVERNMENT OR COMPLAINED ABOUT ITS 'DISCO-
VERY.'" FORTUNATELY, HOWEVER, OTHER PAPERS WERE MORE
CAREFUL TO SEPARATE THE ALLEGATIONS, ATTRIBUTED TO AN ABC
NEWS REPORT, FROM THE USG STATEMENT.

4. THE PRESIDENT OF THE ATOMIC ENERGY BOARD, DR. J.W.L.

DE VILLIERS REPORTEDLY DESCRIBED THE "AMERICAN ALLEGATIONS" AS "TOTAL NONSENSE." "IF THERE WAS SUCH AN EXPLOSION IN THE AREA AS ALLEGEDLY DETECTED BY THE U.S. SPY SATELLITE, MY FIRST REACTION IS THAT SOME OTHER POWER MIGHT HAVE UNDERTAKEN A TEST BUT THAT IT WAS DEFINITELY NOT SOUTH AFRICA."

5. FOREIGN MINISTER PIK BOTHA ALSO PUBLICLY DENIED KNOWLEDGE OF A SOUTH AFRICAN NUCLEAR TEST. "WHY DON'T YOU ASK THE RUSSIANS OR THE CHINESE, OR EVEN THE AMERICANS?" HE REFERRED TO THE SIZE OF THE AREA IN WHICH THE STATE DEPARTMENT SAID THERE WERE "INDICATIONS SUGGESTING" AN EXPLOSION AND NOTED, "SOUTH AFRICA IS NOT ANTARCTICA. WE MIGHT EVEN BE TALKING ABOUT AUSTRALIA OR NEW ZEALAND. IT IS A PARTICULARLY VAST AREA IN WHICH THE PHENOMENON IS SUPPOSED TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE. IF THE AMERICANS DON'T KNOW WHAT IS GOING ON, I SUGGEST THEY FIRST MAKE SURE OF THEIR FACTS BEFORE THEY RUN AWAY WITH THE IDEA. BOTHA REPORTEDLY SAID IT WAS FOOD FOR THOUGHT "THAT THE AMERICANS ARE SO NERVOUS. AS LEADERS OF THE WESTERN WORLD, THEY SHOULD DISPLAY GREATER CALM AND MORE SELF-CONFIDENCE. THEY SHOULD NOT PANIC SO EASILY AND SHOULD BE LESS FILLED WITH DREAD." EXTRACTS FROM THE FOREIGN MINISTER'S STATEMENT WERE ALSO CARRIED ON THE SABC RADIO NEWS.

6. PIK WAS ALSO REPORTEDLY INTERVIEWED BY ABC (AMERICAN BROADCASTING CORP.) IN HIS OFFICE THIS MORNING. ACCORDING TO THE REPORT, PIK SAID:

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TO BRIEF PRINTED REPORTS, HE AGAIN TOOK THE LINE THAT THE U.S. SHOULD ACCEPT ITS ROLE AS AN ANTI-MARXIST STATE CALMLY AND COURAGEOUSLY AND NOT RAITLE SO EASILY. AS TO WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED, BOTHASAID THE U.S. SHOULD "ASK... NEPTUNE. AS GOD OF THE SEA MAYBE HE KNOWS WHAT HAPPENED." AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN, HOWEVER, REPORTS THAT INFORMED NEWS SOURCES HAVE INDICATED THAT, DURING THAT INTERVIEW, PIK POINTEDLY REFUSED TO DENY THAT THE SAG HAD DETONATED A NUCLEAR DEVICE; HE REPEATED ONLY EARLIER STATEMENTS THAT "I KNOW NOTHING OF SUCH A PHENOMENON..."

7. SEVERAL NEWSPAPER REPORTS HAVE ALREADY BEGUN SPECULATING ON THE EFFECTS OF THE STORY ON US-SA RELATIONS. ONE, "PRETORIA NEWS," CONCLUDED WITH THE FOLLOWING: "POLITICAL OBSERVERS HERE BELIEVE THAT, WHATEVER SOUTH AFRICA SAYS ABOUT THE ALLEGED NUCLEAR BLAST, THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION WILL CONTINUE TO HAVE ITS STRONG SUSPICIONS--OR PERHAPS EVEN A CONVICTION--THAT SOUTH AFRICA HAS DEVELOPED 'NUCLEAR CAPABILITY' AND THAT SHE MIGHT USE IT IF PRESSED. WHATEVER HAPPENS, THE SUSPICION THAT SOUTH AFRICA HAS JOINED THE NUCLEAR CLUB WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY FURTHER CLOUD UNITED STATES-SOUTH AFRICAN RELATIONS. EDMONDSON

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